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Como Citar | How to cite:

Barbu, A. (2017). The Digital AIDS Memorial Quilt: A User's Guide. Revista De Comunicação E Linguagens, (47), 25-33. Obtido de <https://revistas.fcsh.unl.pt/rcl/article/view/1470>

Editor | Publisher:

ICNOVA - Instituto de Comunicação da NOVA

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THE DIGITAL AIDS MEMORIAL QUILT: A USER'S GUIDE

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Abstract

This paper treats the AIDS Memorial Quilt (1985 -) with the care and attention that fine art objects traditionally demand. Specifically, it focuses on the digital Memorial Quilt, an interactive grid that registers the entire 48,000-panel quilt as a publically accessible online database. The interface allows user's to view the intricacies of each memorial design from a micro view or reflect back and view the entire quilt from the macro view as gestalt. I position the digital Memorial Quilt within the centrifugal theory of the grid and thereby consider it as necessarily incomplete structure. This perspective allows us to highlight the millions of unspoken names that are in excess of the frame of the grid. Furthermore, it demands that we think outside of the confines of a conventional formalist visual analysis and towards a certain «beyond the frame attitude.» I propose a certain queer politics of spectatorship that operates in pursuit of this very outside. This level of spectatorship opens up an alternative to the «cultural evidence» paradigm that has largely guided our thinking about the Memorial Quilt as an authentic archive and emblem of the AIDS crisis.

Keywords: Grid; HIV/AIDS; Queer; Formalism; Spectatorship

Introduction

Since its first public display in 1987 on the National Mall in Washington, D.C, the AIDS Memorial Quilt has been characterized as a site of memory, resistance and empowerment. This has resulted in the dominant interpretation of the Memorial Quilt as a form of «cultural evidence» – namely, a coherent, readable text depicting the alarming number of lives lost to the injuries of homophobia at the hands of government neglect and social stigma. Over the course of its nearly twenty-eight-year growth and development, activists across the world have worked to highlight the supposedly inherent virtuousness of the Memorial Quilt as an anti-homophobic visibility project. Accordingly, in recent years the Memorial Quilt has become a popular topic in the feminist and queer studies classroom since it locates many pertinent cultural issues ranging from the body politic to community solidarity that emerged at the onset of the AIDS crisis in the United States.

Cultural theorists and art historians alike have largely evaded a far more mysterious set of questions on the interpretive limits of the Memorial Quilt's grid structure. The following focuses

on a shift in thinking away from the «cultural evidence» paradigm and towards an understanding of the porousness and instability of the frame of the grid. Specifically, these questions are addressed with respect to the recent digital transformation of the Memorial Quilt¹ (henceforth referred to as the digital grid) unveiled by Microsoft Research in 2012. The digital grid registers the complete Memorial Quilt archive as a publically accessible online database. The interface allows users to navigate the grid by scrolling up, down and across the site. It also allows users to alter their viewing distance to the grid from between micro and macro perspectives. For example, at one level, one might view the Memorial Quilt as an abstract grid with no distinct pictorial content, and from another, scroll up to a singular panel and examine the personalized memorial inscription.

If, as Lev Manevich states (2001, p. 93), that we have seen the emergence of a «new cultural metalanguage» where computers are used to «represent cultural values, memories and experiences», then the digital grid allows us to enter into a new set of discussions on the politics representation. This leads us to pose two interrelated questions: How does its grid structure challenge our understanding of the effectiveness of the Memorial Quilt as an archive and emblem of the AIDS crisis? Accordingly, what is at stake in the excess of its grid structure? To address these issues we are required to read the Memorial Quilt with the care and attention that fine art objects traditionally demand. The analysis will thus be conducted across several established art historical texts to arrive at possible alternative readings. Here, another set of questions must be introduced: What queer spaces emerge when we re-return to canonical art theory texts with a different set of tools, priorities and vocabulary of objects? What is the function of formalist criticism when we intentionally blur the accepted disciplinary boundaries of «art» and «non-art»? Overall, the challenge is to locate the mutable edges of the grid to think beyond formalism and subsequently to develop the idea of a queer politics of spectatorship.

The Digital Grid

The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt was conceived in 1985 and formally established in 1987 by activist Cleve Jones. As the largest ongoing community-based art project in the world, it is largely recognized as the premier symbol of the AIDS crisis.² While sections of

¹ <http://research.microsoft.com/en-us/um/redmond/projects/aidsquilt/>

² <<http://www.aidsquilt.org/about/the-aids-memorial-quilt>>

the Memorial Quilt are regularly exhibited in different sizes and formats, the installations on National Mall in Washington, D.C. in October 1987, 1988, 1989, 1992 and 1996 identify the only years that the display has been featured in its entirety. Today, it is comprised of approximately 94,000 individual handmade memorials spread across 48,000 larger rectangular panels and continues to grow as more names are added to the quilt.

The Memorial Quilt is a site where the personal and political intersect, as private life becomes a public display of resistance. In her analysis on the idea of commemorating memorial and remembering remembrance, Erin J. Rand writes (2007, p. 241) that the Memorial Quilt introduced a kind of public mourning that led to the «production of a gay male subject position that was not defined by perversion and secrecy». The circulation of life-affirming models of visibility such as the Memorial Quilt resulted in new, strengthened ties within an emergent queer community, primarily for the reason that «Impending common death tended to intensify the need for solidarity» (Fung, 2007).

To begin to consider the structural implications of the digital grid, it is crucial to develop an understanding of the materiality of the hand-woven quilt. With respect to the intersecting forms of violence and tragedy that shaped the early years of the AIDS crisis, the hand-woven quilt can be read as an object of catharsis, providing a kind of comfort for griever to cope with their loss. It is associated with comfort symbolically because of its ability to provide warmth materially (Ott, Aoki, Dickinson, 2011, p. 105). The hand-woven quilt produces a certain affective intimacy that is confirmed through the proximate bodily encounter of the spectator. This affective intimacy is enhanced by the fact that the panels seem to stand in for graves and the bodies they keep (Sturken, 1997, p. 196). These characteristics make the vast Memorial Quilt installation a seductive structure, quietly drawing the curious spectator further inward to view the intricacies of the individual designs.

The differences between the hand-woven quilt and digital grid can be traced across to two distinct, yet mutually dependent categories: materiality and interactivity. First, the Memorial Quilt can no longer be thought of as a collection of threads coming together to create a vast structure across open outdoor space. Instead, the digital grid is a diagrammatic formal abstraction of phenomena (Iverson, 2012). It is a compressed collection of data composed of coded variations of numbers and characters. In this respect, the possible meanings of this visual information are radically contingent upon the material conventions of the computer screen as well as the conditions under which this screen is viewed.

Second, the interactive screen allows the user to navigate the digital grid across shifting macro and micro perspectives from which it alternates between two fluid identities: the abstract topographic grid and the intimate personalized memorial. The digital grid is a malleable, shifting image that the user actively goes in and out of (Manovich, 2001, p. 69). This «interfacing» of visual information transforms our thinking about the Memorial Quilt from a static site-specific installation to a dynamic open access digital field. On the one hand, in the case of the hand-woven quilt, there are no restrictions where to start or finish walking through the installation (Yep, 2011, p. 43); on the other, in the case of the digital grid, we are not required to experience grid at any particular distance. As these shifting perspectives guarantee the impossibility of entering into a singular orientation to the site, the user explores, yet never resolves, this indeterminate spatiality. Furthermore, this interactivity registers the user's experience with an irregular rhythm. The encounter is not mediated by the walking gait of the spectator but the instantaneous command of the cursor. One can cover what would otherwise be registered as hundreds of feet of distance in a single moment.

Against Cultural Evidence: The Limits of Representation

The crucial difference that the digital grid introduces is precisely that these alternating macro/micro perspectives reveal the complete grid structure and at the same time clearly demarcate the point in which it crosses over into a blank nothingness. To account for what is at stake beyond the frame, it is useful to recall the centrifugal and centripetal theories of the grid as outlined by Rosalind Krauss in her seminal essay *Grids* (1979). For Krauss, these two contrasting theories have shaped the way that the grid is understood in relation to the development of modern aesthetic production. In the centrifugal theory, «the grid operates from the work of art outward, compelling our acknowledgment of a world beyond the frame», whereas the centripetal theory tracks a movement «from the outer limits of the aesthetic object inward» (Krauss, 1979, p. 60). In short, the centripetal grid maps the space inside the frame onto itself, and the centrifugal grid expands into an inexhaustible and unknowable field outside, existing both *in* and *as* exteriority. The centripetal reading assumes that the grid is a concentrated, complete surface. It is seen as whole, always already reduced, divided and constructed from a greater exterior. The ambiguous outside of the structure is resolved by the stability of its frame, which supports the movement inward towards a detailed reading of the its individual parts. The centrifugal grid

extends beyond the perceivable ends of the structure. It is not a closed system, but rather operates in an open and continuous extension in all directions. The distinction between inside/outside begins to falter since the frame extends into the space that is beyond itself.

Considering these two distinct perspectives, it is useful to recall that the Memorial Quilt is traditionally regarded as a form of «cultural evidence». It remains, however, that the Memorial Quilt cannot tell the complete story of the global impact of the AIDS crisis. Although HIV/AIDS is undoubtedly one of the most far-reaching and devastating global health issues of our time, the Memorial Quilt functions almost exclusively as an emblem of (American) queer visibility.³ In comparison to the 94,000 names archived in the Memorial Quilt, of which were primarily self-identified gay men living in metropolitan American cities, a total of 39 million people have died of HIV worldwide (World Health Organization, 2015). The sheer amount of undocumented AIDS related deaths, particularly in the early stages of the crisis, must also be considered here. The Memorial Quilt can thus be viewed as a contingent and fragmentary reflection of the political urgencies of the time. That it cannot possibly represent every meaningful AIDS death allows us to reflect on the representational limits of the archive itself. The paradox of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, then, is its definitive un-nameability and incompleteness, specifically in terms of its inability to account for those who have not entered into this specific «queer visibility» discourse. Overall, this leads us to the uncomfortable truth that the Memorial Quilt has «failed miserably» in visually representing the atrocity that AIDS has wreaked on the world (DeLuca, Harold, Rufo, 2011, p.73).

Accordingly, a certain threshold of representation is at stake when the digital grid is read as a centripetal, inward-facing structure. The Memorial Quilt itself is assumed to possess a certain kind of wholeness or fullness as an archive and emblem of the AIDS crisis. The centripetal reading privileges the internal structure and denies that which is in excess of the structure, namely the immeasurable number of lives lost that have not and will not be represented in the quilt. Conversely, the centrifugal reading allows us consider the archive from a different perspective. It is no longer seen an exhaustive archive, but rather a piece of the world extending in the direction of an imperceptible, unattainable whole. The centrifugal reading expresses a certain commitment to the unknown, ambiguous outside that extends beyond the frame of the grid. It looks beyond that which is internal to the structure and instead emphasizes the exclusions that make this frame possible, namely the lack that «forms and is formed by the frame» (Derrida, 1979, p. 33). This shift towards the centrifugal reading acts as a kind of corrective measure of interpretation that

³ For a detailed explanation, see: Morris, C. (2011). The Mourning After. In *Remembering the AIDS Quilt* (pp. xlv). East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.

keeps the excess of the unspoken names at the center of the discussion. This reading supports our task in considering the work that the Memorial Quilt cannot do.

Queering Spectatorship

This analysis of the structure of the digital grid allows us to return to the original Memorial Quilt installation with a different set of questions related to certain ideals of modernist aesthetic value. In particular, by revisiting Michael Fried's influential formalist text *Art and Objecthood* (1967), we can begin to consider the minimalist implications of the Memorial Quilt alongside position of the spectator. The central argument in *Art and Objecthood* is that «literalist» or minimalist art wrongly deviates from the modernist project to defeat «objecthood». Fried defines objecthood as the condition of exteriority that draws our attention and our bodies outside of the distinct, internal composition of the artwork. In this reading, the ambiguous presence of the minimalist object expresses a «theatricality» that confronts the viewer and leads to an undefined experience that has no necessary beginning or end. It is the inexhaustible duration of the experience that ultimately sets up a network of «distances» between the artwork, the body and the surrounding environment (Fried, 1995).

The Memorial Quilt installation draws similarities to the minimalist art object not simply because of its flatbed spatial arrangement but also its temporal indistinctness. In short, it possesses no necessary point of within-ness from which to anchor a proper formalist aesthetic evaluation. The objecthood of the Memorial Quilt installation opens up an indeterminate space that threatens to undermine the primacy of the centripetal interiority of the structure. As an expression of pure exteriority, the centrifugal reading inverts Fried's reading of theatricality as alienation and instead registers this condition as opening up the possibility for an intimate engagement with the outside.

Fried's account develops and contributes to a mode of art historical inquiry often referred to as formalist criticism. In short, formalism is a method of visual analysis that privileges the significant form or «formal singularity» of objects and images (Bois, 1995, p. 13). The formalist critic arrives at a rational interpretation by following visual cues and forms of evidence that source from the discrete structure of the artwork. Considering Fried's polemic against the alienating spatial and temporal indistinctness of the minimalist art object, here replaced by the flatbed Memorial Quilt installation, it is evident that a purely formalist approach does not allow

us to reach outside of the visible threshold of representation demarcated by the frame of the object or experience. Formalism is unable and unwilling to abandon the significant form of an artwork in favor of the non-visible interpretive excess of the encounter.

Given these concerns, we can return to the original question: What level of spectatorship is required to view both the hand-woven and digital Memorial Quilt beyond the “cultural evidence” paradigm? The above schism indicates that we must engage in a different mode of visual analysis with a different set of priorities. In particular, this means exploring ways of seeing that extend from the «beyond the frame attitude» (Krauss, 1979, p. 63). The beyond the frame attitude marks a decision to interrogate the non-representable lack that makes the representation possible. It highlights the necessity of examining what is in excess of the visible. This shift in perspective thus demands a certain queer politics of spectatorship that is not simply focused on analysing visual cues and forms of visual evidence, but rather operates in pursuit of the distances that lead us astray outside of the object, towards infinite unknowable outside (Haver, 1999, p. 12). What is at stake in this usage of the word «queer» is not the promise of visibility or the virtuous, holistic representation of a marginalized subgroup. Instead, it underscores an intimate engagement with the uncertain space beyond the frame of intelligibility. This queerness indicates an interruptive interpretive operation rather than a stable identity category (Britzman, 1995, p. 153). Such a distinction is important because it stresses the Memorial Quilt can no longer be reduced to an interpretation of queer «content», which relies on the faulty assumption that it is an *inherently* queer object due to the historical conditions within which it is traditionally positioned. Accordingly, to begin to highlight the work that the Memorial Quilt cannot do, we must avoid the impulse of privileging the significant form of the grid. A queer politics of spectatorship presupposes that in this lack we brush against an opening for new levels of non-visual engagement with visual culture.

Conclusion

The digital grid challenges traditional ways of seeing, comprehending and being-with the Memorial Quilt. However paradoxically, our test has been to *misuse* the digital interface and transgress its borders to arrive at an inverse reading of the Memorial Quilt as an archive and emblem of the AIDS crisis. Furthermore, our test has been to propose a level of spectatorship that operates in pursuit the space beyond the frame. What is at stake in this crossing-over undoubtedly reaches beyond the isolated example of the Memorial Quilt. Broadly, it implicates

the overarching politics of exclusion and violences of representation that belong to everyday experience. We must be willing to accept the difficult truth that this space beyond the frame cannot be resolved by promoting a more perfect, holistic set of cultural representations. Visual studies must begin to explore the image's non-visible lack for its own sake.

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Received for publication/ Data de recepção: 12/01/2016
Accepted in revised form/ Data de aceitação: 12/12/2016